

Index Cards: A Natural Resource for Teachers

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In an effort to supplement lesson plans in the ESL classroom, teachers often turn to games. The justification for using games in the classroom has been well demonstrated as benefiting students in a variety of ways. These benefits range from cognitive aspects of language learning to more cooperative group dynamics.

Choosing the correct game for a class is not as simple as it seems. Care should be given to the selection so that the success of a game is inevitable. Teachers should consider the following factors while planning the use of a game: classroom space; noise; materials necessary for the game; the amount of time needed for the game; and the level, culture, interests, and age of the students. Does the game relate to a structure, topic, or function that is being used in your class? Choose a game that complements whatever you are doing in class.

Developing games for the classroom is often too costly for the teacher in terms of time and money to make the effort worthwhile. Typing handouts and making copies for the class becomes draining physically and financially whether the teacher is working with institutional or personal funds. However, index cards provide an inexpensive and easy source of possible activities for language learning. Index cards have several favorable aspects. Aside from being relatively inexpensive, they are also easily available anywhere in the world. Teachers in both small rural communities as well as in major cities have access to them. These cards are easily organized and stored in any type of small box. Special index card files make organization quick and handy, but often an old shoe box works just as well. Once cards are stored, they are also easily portable from classroom to classroom or country to country. These cards become part of a teacher's permanent collection of resources. With a little care, index cards are also reusable once an activity has been developed. In addition, these cards are often adaptable to other levels, so that one set of cards may provide two or three different activities. Index cards also provide a dynamic resource for lessons, giving students a welcome break from textbooks, work sheets, and other standard classroom fare. These activities can be utilized as part of the lesson, fulfilling an objective instead of an activity that merely fills a period of time.

The variety of games and activities for which index cards may be employed is limitless. The few examples explained here should be considered only as a starting point. With some imagination and experience, countless other activities will no doubt come to mind.

Cards and Words

The easiest place to begin is with single words on each index card. For these activities, "card conservation" is easily accomplished by cutting the cards in half since the space needed to write

the word on the card does not need to be large. The words used on the cards should come from students' basic vocabulary or vocabulary introduced in the class. Students may either work as a class to review definitions with the teacher, or quiz each other in pairs or groups using the cards. A variation of this type of activity also involves taping the cards to the blackboard and having the students work in teams. Each team takes a turn choosing a card from the board and giving a definition or a sentence using the word. Giving points for correct definitions can turn this simple activity into a game in which two teams compete against each other. This activity can be used from a beginning level all the way up to a TOEFL preparation class.

Word cards are also useful for pronunciation practice. A dynamic variation of choral pronunciation practice would be to have a pronunciation relay race. With the class divided into two teams, one person from each team goes to the blackboard. Another person from each team then chooses the top card from a pile of cards designed for each team. The student with the card reads the word on the card, and then the student at the blackboard writes the word that he or she hears. The student with the card may repeat the word several times until the word written on the board is correct. Both teams are reading the cards (different cards for each team) and writing at the same time. Once the word on the board is correct, the reading and writing rotates to the other members of the teams. The first team to write all of their words on the board correctly wins. Instead of words, dictated sentences can provide a variation of this activity.

Cards and Sentences

Cards with sentences written on them may also be used for a variety of activities. The following activities all use only one sentence per card.

Students can arrange these cards with sentences in the proper order to form a dialog. The benefit for students here is that they can physically move one sentence with respect to the others until they reach a logical sequence of sentences for the dialog. This same idea may be extended to sequencing tasks from any kind of narrative paragraph. Lyrics from a narrative song used in this way may serve as a listening follow-up activity for students in order to check their answers.

Sentences on cards may also be used as prompts for students to develop dialogs or for free conversation. A sentence describing a particular communicative function (i.e., suggesting a place to eat, giving a friend advice, etc.) can serve as the structure for students to write dialogs in pairs for role-playing. Or students might be asked to explain embarrassing situations described on cards: "You are seen coming out of a bar at 1 a.m. without your shirt on." The student must then explain how s/he came to be in this situation. Students can even write their own embarrassing situations, and the other students can decide if the explanation is sufficient or believable.

Cards as Pictures

Many teachers use picture files for all kinds of activities. By converting the smaller pictures in these files into index cards (by gluing the picture onto the index card, for example), teachers will

find that both filing and storing these pictures becomes easier. These pictures are also extremely adaptable to different levels and activities.

Put an interesting face or person on an index card, and the possibilities for discussion are amazing. Describing the person for a partner gives students a chance to use a wider range of vocabulary if people from many cultures and lifestyles are shown on the cards. For a lesson on adjectives, students can describe the person's appearance. For a lesson on clothing, students can describe the things the people are wearing. Students may also role-play with partners practicing introductions or creating dialogs playing the part of the person shown on the card. If the people on the cards are not famous, students may also create their own personalities for the people. Obviously this type of activity also lends itself well to writing tasks in describing or telling stories about the people in the pictures.

The examples described above merely scratch the surface of the activities possible with the use of index cards. Sharing your ideas with colleagues will expand the use of these index cards. Teachers are encouraged to use their imaginations and tap into this often neglected resource of classroom material.

General Benefits of Games

Affective:

- > lowers affective filter
- > encourages creative and spontaneous use of language
- > promotes communicative competence
- > motivates
- > fun

Cognitive:

- > reinforces
- > reviews and extends
- > focuses on grammar communicatively

Class Dynamics:

- > student centered
- > teacher acts only as facilitator
- > builds class cohesion
- > fosters whole class participation
- > promotes healthy competition

Adaptability:

- > easily adjusted for age, level, and interests
- > utilizes all four skills
- > requires minimum preparation after development

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